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Verification Of SALT Is Questioned

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Answering a query from Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., the acting director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency has written that the agency, "before our SALT review is completed," is unable to assure that Soviet compliance with SALT I and II can be adequately verified.

The last two directors of the arms control agency had written to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during discussion of SALT II that treaty compliance could be adequately verified. However, some sources said there have been significant changes in the situation since then.

The current acting director of the agency, Michael Pillsbury, wrote to Helms within the last day or two that verification could not be confirmed pending review of the situation. Pillsbury's letter quoted a statement by President Reagan that the Soviets lie and cheat.

The answer, signed by Pillsbury, said a full report is being prepared. "Of course, before our SALT review is completed," it said, "we are unable to reassure you that these agreements are adequately verifiable at the present time."

"Clearly, in matters of arms control verification" the reply continued, "our review must be guided by the president's warning about the Soviets on Jan. 29, 1981. He said, '... the only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain [a one-world socialist or Communist state], and that is moral, not immoral, and we operate on a different set of standards. I think when you do business with them, even at a detente, you keep that in mind.'"

The reply is expected to touch off a new controversy on Capitol Hill and in the Reagan administration on the strategic arms limitation treaties with the Soviet Union.

The person identified by White House officials as Reagan's intended nominee to be the permanent head of the arms control agency, Eugene Rostow, said yesterday that he has in the past emphasized "the enormous difficulties of verification." He said this would have to be one of the first issues to be considered if he is nominated and confirmed by the Senate.

Helms has put a hold on any action on Rostow pending assurances on who would staff the agency under Rostow, whom Helms considers to be a liberal. The conservative North Carolinian was among 12 senators who on Feb. 18 urged Reagan to name Pillsbury as the agency's deputy director.

Pillsbury's letter to Helms added a new complication to a confused administration situation on SALT. An interdepartmental group has been meeting to review policy on it, but no basic decisions have been reached.

The group has, according to informed sources, been moving closer than previous administrations have ever gotten toward formal findings that the Soviet Union has violated the two SALT treaties. SALT I was ratified and went into effect in 1972, and SALT II was signed in 1979 but never ratified.

A former arms control agency official who had been critical of the treaties, John Lehman, said last month in his new position as secretary of the Navy that there is no legal basis for the United States to honor the agreements. If asked, Lehman said, he would recommend that the administration not comply with them.

This brought a quick rejoinder from Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., who felt his official prerogatives were being pre-empted.

Calling Lehman's statement unauthorized, Haig said, "While we are reviewing our SALT policy, we will take no action that would undercut existing agreements so long as the Soviet Union exercises the same restraint."

Haig's statement raised the question of whether the administration could be sure if the Soviet Union were exercising restraint. Officials said yesterday that Haig's statement was issued without any detailed study by the new administration of the verification issue.

Both retired Lt. Gen. George M. Seignious II and Ralph Earle II, the last two arms control agency directors, assured Frank Church when he was the committee's chairman that SALT II could be adequately verified.

During the committee's consideration of SALT II in 1979, the then head of the CIA, Adm. Stansfield Turner, and of the National Security Agency, Adm. Bobby Inman, testified that the treaty was verifiable. Inman is now deputy head of the CIA, which plays a key role in analyzing verification questions largely on the basis of data collected by the NSA.

But there have always been government technical experts and analysts who have disagreed with the assurances on verifiability.

In a telephone interview from his office at the Yale Law School, Rostow said that the possibility of Soviet concealment of weapons and the difficulties of determining the numbers of warheads on Soviet missiles had always been stressed by him. Rostow is a leader of the Committee on the Present Danger that has opposed SALT II. It has taken the position that the treaty "is far from being verifiable."